

## Sister Erin Zubal, OSU



“I don’t have a lightning bolt story,” says Sister Erin Zubal when I ask her to share her journey to becoming the youngest member of the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland. Questions swirl: How did she know that becoming an Ursuline sister was her true calling? Did she ever experience doubts? Was her relationship with God strong and steady throughout her life?

It is during this moment that I realize how fitting it is that Sr. Erin introduced the imagery of the lightning bolt. I spoke with Sr. Erin via a Zoom video call; incredibly still, I was absolutely struck by the power of her presence. She embodies an unwavering grace that encompasses her audience completely. Her words carry the weight of someone who is thoughtful, deliberate, and bares her true self honestly and without adornment. When Sr. Erin speaks, her voice demands full attention, is formidable, and bright — much like the strike of a lightning bolt.

Sr. Erin is one of one hundred and ten Ursuline sisters based out of the Cleveland province. She is the youngest sister. She joined the congregation in 2006, which means she has been an Ursuline for eighteen years. Sr. Erin considers her unique position as the youngest Cleveland sister to be “a humbling and precious weight,” and she honors the legacy of those who served before her.

Though she did not experience a sudden, visceral calling, or a “lightning bolt story,” that she was meant to join the Ursulines, Sr. Erin was surrounded by sisters throughout her young life. She was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, and raised by Catholic parents. She was educated by the Sisters of Notre Dame in grade school and the Ursulines in high school and in college. As a young adult, Sr. Erin benefitted from the wisdom and example set by the sisters. She recognized and remembers their independence, faith, intelligence, and dedication to service.

Sr. Erin graduated from Ursuline College in 2005 with a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work. She then received a Master’s degree in Educational Administration from Ursuline College and a Master’s degree in Social Science Administration from Case Western Reserve University.

After graduation from her Master’s program, Sr. Erin experienced a period of uncertainty about what she was meant to do next. “I always knew I was meant to live a life of service,” Sr. Erin reflects. “And I wanted to be surrounded by strong women.” Those desires, coupled with her faith, inspired Sr. Erin to join the Ursulines. Sr. Erin did experience doubts about her decision to join the congregation, though her doubts were never about the way of life and only about the process of becoming a sister. Now, having been an Ursuline for almost two decades, Sr. Erin is sure that the decision to become an Ursuline was her path. “For whatever reason,” Sr. Erin says, “I am called to live a religious life at this moment in time.” She continues, “My Ursuline sisters have embraced me from the day I entered the congregation and I could go to any one of them for anything.”

After joining the congregation, Sr. Erin began her career as an educator and social worker in some of Cleveland’s Catholic elementary and high schools. She served in many roles, including as a social worker, teacher, campus minister, athletic director, assistant principal, and principal.

In trying to explain the relationships the Ursuline sisters of Cleveland share with one another, Sr. Erin told me the following story. She had recently taken over as principal of an elementary school that was struggling. It was a major undertaking to organize and clean the space. One weekend, twenty six Ursulines showed up to the school to help Sr. Erin. They sorted all of the school uniforms, checked to make sure every teacher file was up to date and complete, and cleaned the interior of the school. “They made it possible for me to open the school doors,” states Sr. Erin. That kind of dedication — that commitment to showing up for each other, time and time again, selflessly, is at the heart of the Ursuline mission. It is the embodiment of *Serviam*.

Personally, Sr. Erin finds that her most effective and meaningful form of prayer is through daily action. Two examples of this commitment to service are demonstrated by Sr. Erin's accompaniment work with Congolese families that have immigrated to the U.S., and her position as Chief of Staff at NETWORK, located in Washington, D.C.

Sr. Erin's Ursuline sisters introduced her to the work serving recently-immigrated Congolese families. She helps them with language proficiency, and serves in whatever capacity she is needed, often operating as an educational liaison, helping to make medical appointments, pay bills, and aid with transportation. Sr. Erin currently serves six different families.

NETWORK is a national lobby founded in 1971 by a group of Catholic sisters. Its mission is to educate, organize, and lobby on federal legislation, most often regarding housing, healthcare, and immigration. As Chief of Staff, Sr. Erin maintains and oversees a work environment where staff can thrive.

Sr. Erin's admirable focus on service has guided the trajectory of her life and continues to fulfill her. Her deep connection to her Ursuline sisters is a reminder of the importance of community and sisterhood, harkening back to St. Angela Merici's belief in the power of women supporting other women.

When asked if she had a message to share with current Ursuline Academy students, Sr. Erin emphasized the following: "I hope that they appreciate the value of showing up for each other and foster that in their every day and especially after graduation. In this age of social media, I pray that the charism of Saint Angela is found within each other. That is the essence of what Angela has called us to do and the essence of our Ursuline community. It will carry them through the tough parts of life."

The Ursuline sisterhood, shared between classmates, between Ursuline sisters of the same and different provinces, shared between strangers, has made an indelible and permanent mark on our world. It is embodied by women like Erin Zubal, who recognize the charism of Angela in others. During this month of March when we celebrate women's contributions worldwide, we thank Sr. Erin for her tireless devotion to those communities in need where she has made an impact. May she continue to radiate love and service, lighting up our world like a bolt of lightning in the dark.



From left to right, all NETWORK staff:  
Sister Emily TeKolste, SP  
Sister Eilis McCulloh, HM  
Sister Erin Zubal, OSU  
Kristin Schol